Pregnancy complications tied to later stroke risk

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Women who suffer certain complications during pregnancy apparently run a higher risk of having a stroke later in life, according to findings reported Tuesday at the annual meeting of the American Neurological Association in San Diego, California.

Dr. Monique V. Chireau and colleagues at Duke University Medical Center in Durham, North Carolina, used the university's Perinatal and Health Services Outcomes database to investigate a possible link between pregnancy complications and stroke risk.

The data covered 42,263 women who gave birth between 1979 and 2005, of whom 164 suffered a stroke an average of 13.5 years after having their child, at an average age of 40 years. Chireau's team matched these women by age and month and year of delivery to 311 women without strokes.

Women were assessed for pregnancy complications, such as pregnancy-related high blood pressure (pre-eclampsia) and diabetes, preterm birth, lack of amniotic fluid, postpartum hemorrhage and stillbirth.

The Duke team found that women who had strokes were 70 percent more likely to have had pregnancy complications than were controls. In particular, the odds of having a stroke were doubled with preeclampsia and gestational diabetes.

"Lifestyle factors such as diet, family history of cardiovascular disease, genetic factors and possibly some underlying vascular abnormality may contribute to the increased risk of stroke for women with adverse pregnancy outcomes," Chireau told Reuters Health.

She added, "There is quite a bit of evidence that babies born to women with adverse pregnancy outcomes are themselves at risk for future diabetes and cardiovascular disease, supporting the idea of genetic risk."

"What's especially important to note is that...these women (have) strokes at relatively young ages," Chireau pointed out

She said that low-dose aspirin every other day, to prevent blood clotting, might be appropriate for some women at particularly high risk of having a stroke.